REFLECTIONS ON PLURALISM
1 CORINTHIANS 12:14-23
JULY 2, 1972

That passage of scripture is among the more memorable that Paul ever wrote. In it he created an image of the church - a way of understanding the church, really - that Christians have never been able to forget: that is, the Church as the Body of Christ, and individual Christians as integral, functioning parts of the body.

Now, a sermon on the unity of the Church as Christ's Body on earth is not very unique. Because it is an important theme every minister deals with it on a regular basis. Yet there is a principle beneath the image that, I feel, we do not always acknowledge: an important idea whose time has come in our day. The principle is pluralism. And it is to that principle that I would draw your attention for the purpose of reflecting together this morning.

"Pluralism". What is it? Writing in the recent issue of Church and Society Clarence Cave identifies the "central social and hence theological issue of our time as racial and cultural alienation". And then goes on to identify pluralism as "a condition in which members of diverse ethnic, racial and religious or social groups maintain an autonomous participation in and development of their traditional culture or specific interests within the confines of a common whole..."

If that's a bit heavy think of pluralism in terms of the pop song "I Gotta Be Me" - and apply it to groups of people in our society saying just that - "We Must be Who We Are - and not what someone else says we have to be." Racially, think of it in terms of Afro hair styles and the dashiki, or the burgeoning racial pride of the young, and sometimes angry American Indian. Sociologically think of pluralism in terms of the Amish, and China town and Little Italy and the resurgence of interest in authentic appalachian culture.

Pluralism is perhaps the most exciting and important issue facing the American nation as it celebrates its independence in this year of our Lord 1972. But that gets us ahead of ourselves. St. Paul called our attention to the idea nearly two thousand years ago, so let's return to the Greek city of Corinth and see if we cannot understand a little more fully what he meant.

The fact that Paul had anything to do with the people of Corinth in the first place

is an indication of his pluralistic leanings. For Paul was a Jew. And in the eyes of a first century Jew the world could be conveniently divided into two camps - "them and us." Gentiles - meaning non-Jews - were regarded as unclean, and even though Jesus himself had no qualms about associating with people who stood outside the legal and ritual framework of strict Judaism, his first disciples regarded it as a major problem. They were all Jews - heirs of God's covenant with Abraham, heirs of the Exodus and the law, heirs of the long and painful history of God and his people. And they assumed that to be a participant in the new reality established by Jesus Christ, a man first would need to become a Jew. Paul didn't agree and the dispute was bitter. Finally, at the Council of Jerusalem it was decided that Gentiles could be Christian Gentiles - which was to say that God hadn't made a mistake in creating them Gentiles: and that it would be Paul's special missionary assignment to preach the Gospel to the Gentile world: which is what he did - among other places in Corinth.

And so we see Paul as a Pluralistic thinker, who was the first to sense the universal and pluralistic nature of the Gospel. But there was a division and conflict in the Corinthian Chruch, and ironically it hinged on the same issue that Paul had prosecuted so vigorously in Jerusalem. The Gentiles now were arguing with each other about their relative important in the Church: which is anotherway of arguing about pluralism. The intellectuals among them were insisting that everyone needed to be an intellectual. Those who could do public speaking were insisting that their way needed to be adopted by all. Those gifted in healing were suggesting that all true Christians could heal: those who spoke in tongues said the same. And suddenly Paul sensed the Church coming apart at the seams on the basis of the same old parochialism - the same old tendendy to amalgamate and press everyone into the same mold - that had haunted Judaism.

In response Paul, the pluralistic thinker, compared their fellowship to a body. And in brilliantly clear anologies pointed out that a human body is either pluralistic or it is nothing. The eye can't be an ear. A hand can't be a foot. And if it could - the body itself would not function as it was intended. Each has an appointed assignment: each has a pecular and special function: all are interelated and the whole - the body itself - depends on each one equally.

In personal terms Paul sensed the uniqueness of each individual: each one had a special gift - and none was more essential to the other. In fact the Church depended on each doing what he was able to do to the best of his ability.

That's still an important and essential idea for the life of the church. Because we still are very much inclined to press everybody into the same mold theologically, socially and pietistically. Somehow the Church down through history has come out saying that all Christians ought to believe the same things in the same amounts, use the same vocabulary, pray the same prayers, and if possible look alike, especially on Sunday morning. And if you don't measure up: if you don't "feel" religious according to these stereotyped forms, more often than not you aren't going to be found in the Church. One of the greatest fears of new members always seems to be that we're going to ask them to stand up and offer prayer in Elizabethian English.

Well all of us have a function - an important, vital function in the life of the Church. I was intrigued by my friend Eric Dean's suggestion (Wabash College Professor) that the monks in their monastery perform a vital function for the rest of the Church: they believe for us: they pray for us. they practice a disciplined piety in a way the rest of us cannot and will not.

The longer I am a pastor the more I see the truth of that and Paul's pluralism in the life of the local Church. We depend on teachers and plumber, financial wizards and soprano's, typists and drivers: we depend on believers and skeptics, pray-ers and people who can't pray: we depend on traditionalists and free spirits, or young people and old people - even on Cub fans and Pirate fans by the grace of God. And we need each one for this body to be alive and vigorous and healthy.

The principle of pluralism is important and it has application beyond the boundries of the church.

Think for a minute about the relationships in marriage and family. Traditionally the role of women in marriage and the family has been as wife to a husband and mother to children. So much so that the women ceased being a person and became literally two functions. And in this day, when divorce is more socially acceptable we've suddenly discovered that when the children leave and husband is totally engrossed in a career, there is a non-person

climbing the walls of an empty home. We are finally learning what the psychologists have known all along: that a strong marital relationship is based on two strong people who know who they are and enjoy being who they are and have a life apart from each other. We are finally learning that any kind of need that does not grow out of the ability to stand alone is a sick need: that dependence on each other is healthy only when it grows out of a fierce independence.

Kahlil Gibran the great Eastern Christian said it all a long time ago:

> Let there be spaces in your togetherness, and let the winds of the heavens dance between you.
> Love one another, but make not a bond of love: Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.
> Fill each other's cup but drink not from one cup. Give one another of your bread but eat not from the same loaf.
> Sing and dance together and be joyous but let each one of you be alone. Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the same music. And stand together yet not too near together. For the pillars of the temple stand apart, and the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow.

That's pluralism in marriage.

Think now about our nation - our culture - and its function. As we celebrate Independence Day our attention is drawn backward into the past - to the vision of Thomas Jefferson and the commitment of George Washington. But ,if the occasion is celebrated appropriately part of our attention needs to be focused on the present and the future. We are unquestionably undergoing great and tremendous change as a nation. The very structures of our society, the concepts and ideas that have ordered our life for 200 years are all up for examination and evaluation. We are an old nation: we think of ourselves as new, but in relationship to the rest of the world we are old and established. And if history is any kind of school master our ability to survive will depend on our ability to change.

In the process we must learn to bury with honor and grace the realities of the past and to deal with the new realities that are now emerging. And the most important of those new realities for our nation - I believe - is pluralism. Either we will learn to deal with the pluralism of the American people with honesty and justice - or that very pluralism will pull our nation apart - even as it threatened to pull apart the Christian Church in first century Corinth.

We have assumed, for 200 years in this nation, that our culture was a melting pot: that somehow we could take all the cultures of the world, and often a respectable period of time, melt them down into one common American culture. We have assumed that the African, the Asian, the Chicano, the central European, and most pathetically of all, the American Indian,need most of all to look and act like middle class white people. We have assumed that it was right and good to measure all behavior by our norms, and as a consequence we managed to communicate to all the world our conviction that other cultures were a little inferior and that deviant behavior was a little subversive. So paranoid did we become over the years that when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor we herded our people of Japanese descent into concentration camps for the duration of the war. And b efore that we emasculated an entire culture of original inhabitants of the land by keeping them out of sight and poor and powerless in another kind of concentration camp called a reservation. And today - incredibly ther are still some who resent a black person who wears an Afro and is proud of being black - because that means he's escaping from the sociological concentration camp American culture has built for him.

Almagamation didn't work: almost but not quite. We almost succeeded in getting everybody to feel bad about being black or brown or yellow or red. But then, in our something happened: something deep in the spirit of man surfaced. And they all said "wait a minute: we're not going to pretend any longer. We want to participate in this democratic experiemtn - this greatest hope of mankind - but we must be who we are: and we must stop trying to become white and middle class in order to get in".

Suddenly American Blacks discovered that they had a history and an identity and a heritage of which they could be proud. Suddenly all the minorities discovered that most dramatically of all the American Indian. I sat in a meeting in Denver in a room full of

Indian people who were there to ask the PRESBYTERIAN Church to take them seriously - not as potential white Presbyterians - but as God's children. They came - not in shirts and ties but in the attire of their culture, and they weren't apologizing. I found myself thinking about a television show I had seen once in which a white teacher in a reservation school and cut the long beautiful hair of an Indian girl to "make her look better": and I wondered what they were thinking about as I sat in their midst - white middle class heir of the culture that tried to elliminate their ancestors entirely.

They are learning to find dignity and pride in being who they are: they want to be part of this culture - but no longer if it means being "melted" - and I think that - that emerging pluralism is the most important thing happening in our nation today.

It's an old issue that St. Paul articulated for us centuries ago. In theological terms pluralism is an affirmation of the goodness of God's creation: an affirmation that God in his providence built diversity into the scheme of things: that he know what he was doing when he made us to be different from each other.

In ecclesiastical terms pluralism is an affirmation that we need the diversity each of us brings to Christian Faith.

And in national terms pluralism means the future: a future built on vigorous differences: a culture that learns from its contributing culture: a society that guards each man's dignity and offers each man - each group - the gift of equality and justice.

If paul was right - that's what God had in mind for his creation - and for our nation. Let us begin - today - to think and work and pray to that end. AMEN

Father, you are the father of all men. We affirm that: help us now to live and act as if we mean it. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN